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# Growing Flowering Perennials

Perennials are plants whose roots live from year to year. Depending upon the species, the leaves and stems may die back each fall and grow back again in the spring. The “perennial” growth habit makes them a popular addition to any home landscape.

Success with perennials depends in great part on proper planning. Soil preparation, fertilization and plant selection play key roles in any perennial garden.

## **Soil preparation**

Perennials grow best in well-drained fertile soils. In many situations this will require amending or altering the present garden soil. To determine if this is necessary, have the soil analyzed at a testing laboratory. Get a soil test kit by visiting your local Cooperative Extension office or calling the toll-free Family, Home & Garden Education Center Info Line (**1-877-398-4769**). Soil test results will determine soil type, pH level (acidity or alkalinity) and the levels of important plant nutrients. Add fertilizer, lime or other soil amendments based upon the laboratory recommendations.

When soil test results are not available, apply dolomitic limestone at the rate of 5 to 10 pounds per 100 square feet for new garden sites and one or two inches of organic matter such as compost or rotted manure. Select a complete general purpose fertilizer such as 5-10-10, 10-10-10, or 5-10-5 and apply it at a rate of 3 to 5 pounds per 100 square feet.

Mix the lime, organic material and fertilizer thoroughly into the top 8 to 10 inches of soil. If drainage is a problem, plant the perennials in raised beds.

## **Plant selection**

Perennial gardens can be planned around a number of themes or ideas. Silver gardens, medicinal plants, colonial gardens and many other themes can be the center of any garden plan.

Whether you choose a theme or not, map out the garden area on graph paper. Make selections considering the eventual height and space requirement for each mature plant and locate plants on paper. Tall plants are most frequently placed near the back of the perennial border and shorter plants closer to the front.

Another key factor involves the frequency of bloom. Select perennials which will bloom at different times throughout the growing season. Staggering blooming periods will provide some color at all times. If color is lacking, gardeners can selectively place flowering annuals to help fill in the gaps in the bloom period. Be sure to coordinate flower colors with bloom times for maximum effect.

## **Planting and maintaining perennials**

Many perennials are easy to grow from seed or cuttings. However, for the beginner, the best plan is to purchase young, vigorous plants from a local nursery or garden center. These container-grown perennials can be planted outdoors anytime during the growing season.

Set the plants in a hole placed at the same depth as they were in the container. Water well and enjoy the results.

Early in the season, lightly cultivate or weed the garden soil. Later, a light mulch of grass clippings, pine needles, shredded pine bark, or other organic material free of weed seeds will help control weeds, conserve moisture and keep soil temperatures cool.

Perennials may need a light fertilizer application each spring. Yellow leaves and poor growth are indications that fertilizers are needed. Select a complete general purpose fertilizer such as 5-10-10 and apply it at a rate of 2 to 4 pounds per 100 square feet. Excessive fertilization will stimulate unwanted leaf growth and may result in few blooms.

As the season progresses, remove faded blossoms, spent flower stalks and any dead or diseased leaves. Be sure to weed the perennials periodically and water well during dry spells.

## **Dividing perennials**

Most perennial plants should not be left in the same place without division for more than 3 to 4 years. It's time to divide perennials when the center of the clump grows sparsely, flowers are fewer and smaller and the clump gets too big or overcrowded

Divide summer and fall flowering perennials early each spring. Spring flowering plants are best divided after they flower and enter a resting or dormant stage. To divide overgrown clumps, dig up the plant with a garden fork and divide the clump into parts. Retain the outer portion of each clump and discard the mature center parts. Keep 3 to 5 of the most vigorous outer side shoots and replant them. Discard the remaining materials, plant them in another location or give them away. Growing perennials is a social hobby!

## **Winter Protection**

After several hard frosts in the fall, cut back the brown, dead foliage on perennials to 4 to 6 inches above the ground level. After late November, lay down a protective mulch to keep the soil temperature stable and prevent plants from heaving. Ground up leaves, pine needles or straw make good mulches; anchor mulch materials with a light covering of branches.

*Original fact sheet by UNH Extension Agricultural Educators Nancy Adams and Margaret Hagen  
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